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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 000893

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS

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TAGS: MARR MOPS PINS PTER RP

SUBJECT: HURDLES OVERCOME IN BALIKATAN 2008, CHALLENGES  
REMAIN

- REF: A. MANILA 691 (DCM VISIT TO PALAWAN PROFILES U.S.  
ASSISTANCE)  
1B. MANILA 651 (AMBASSADOR FORGES KEY RELATIONSHIPS  
IN MARAWI)  
1C. MANILA 515 (ADMIRAL KEATING EMPHASIZES STRONG  
TIES)  
1D. MANILA 360 (EMBASSY KEEPS BALIKATAN EXERCISE ON  
TRACK)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: This year's Balikatan U.S.-Philippine joint annual military exercise was a solid success but was not without controversy, as insufficient public affairs coordination on the part of Philippine authorities led some local leaders, principally in central Mindanao, to complain that they were not consulted adequately about the exercise. A public diplomacy push prior to and during Balikatan 2008 by Embassy and Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) personnel did much to counter erroneous impressions of why and how the exercise would be conducted, allaying misperceptions by the Muslim community. While the value of this year's exercise was unquestioned, the Mission is carefully reviewing options to avoid protests against humanitarian activities next year and to ensure that our Philippine counterparts take a more proactive stance in developing and implementing public outreach prior to future Balikatan and other joint U.S.- Philippine military efforts.  
END SUMMARY.

FOCUS ON CIVIL-MILITARY OPERATIONS

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12. (SBU) First conducted in 1991, Balikatan has evolved over the past 17 years into the premier joint U.S.-Philippine military exercise, allowing the U.S. and Philippine military to improve individual capacity and interoperability. While field training and combat exercises have been an integral part of Balikatan, at the Embassy's suggestion, greater emphasis was placed this year on strengthening cooperation on disaster assistance, maritime security, and conducting civil-military operations. Overall, more than 8,000 U.S. and Philippine military personnel participated, with a small contingent of U.S. troops taking part in medical and engineering civil affairs projects in Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, and on the remote island of Balabac in southern Palawan. Between February 15 and March 3, U.S. and Philippine personnel treated more than 18,000 patients at 37 temporary medical and dental clinics. At the Embassy's urging, local Muslim NGOs played a more prominent role in the humanitarian activities than in the past.

## COUNTERING MISPERCEPTIONS

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**¶13. (C)** Despite the success of the civil-military projects conducted throughout the southern Philippines, concerns cited by local leaders in the predominately Muslim areas of central Mindanao focused on their perception that they were not consulted adequately or far enough in advance by either Philippine or U.S. authorities about planned activities in their areas. Troublesome allegations arose from some sectors of the Muslim leadership that Balikatan was a purely combat-focused military exercise directed at the Muslim population. Some argued that Balikatan was not only a pretext for military action directed against the local Muslim population, but also a cover to appropriate by force the region's mineral and mining assets.

**¶14. (C)** Philippine authorities did not reach out to the Muslim leadership in Mindanao sufficiently in advance. Elections in May 2007 had, in some places, produced new local leaders unfamiliar with Balikatan's humanitarian activities in 2007 and 2006. Early public statements emphasizing the influx of thousands of U.S. soldiers created opportunities for leftists to ignite fears of large military maneuvers in Mindanao. Anti-Balikatan demonstrations in Marawi, Cagayan de Oro, and other cities prompted local officials to make public statements criticizing Balikatan, or insufficient consultations, even while telling us privately they supported the humanitarian assistance.

**¶15. (C)** To counter the misperception among critics that Balikatan was solely about combat exercises, Mission representatives undertook a thorough public diplomacy campaign to inform congressional, provincial, and local leaders that no military exercises would take place in

MANILA 00000893 002 OF 003

Mindanao or the Sulu Archipelago; that all activities in these regions would be humanitarian in nature; and that the U.S. personnel who participated would work alongside their Philippine counterparts at all times. In various meetings, Mission representatives and JSOTF-P staff stressed to political leaders that Balikatan is part of the multifaceted framework of cooperation and development assistance that exists between our respective countries (ref D).

## GIVING A BOOST TO BALIKATAN EVENTS

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**¶16. (C)** The Ambassador and the DCM visited several medical and engineering project sites to promote the cooperation between the U.S. and Philippine governments in carrying out Balikatan. On February 19, the Ambassador visited Jolo Island, where a regional health clinic was being constructed.

The next week, on February 26, the Ambassador, accompanied by PACOM Commander Admiral Keating, visited a Balikatan engineering project in Cavite where a high school was being rebuilt (ref C). On March 1, the Ambassador attended a medical event conducted at a local clinic in the Marawi area in central Mindanao (ref B). The DCM visited the remote island of Balabac off the southern coast of Palawan on March 3, observing the construction of high school classrooms as part of an engineering project being conducted jointly by the Philippine military and the U.S. 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit. During the event in Balabac, the mayor of the primarily Muslim population heaped praise on the U.S. Marines for their hard work, stating, "We hope this is the beginning of a strong relationship with the United States" (ref A). During these visits, the Ambassador and DCM described the joint benefits to the Filipino people in media appearances that received widespread coverage.

## REACHING DIFFICULT AUDIENCES

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**¶17. (C)** While some critics harshly criticized U.S. presence in the southern Philippines associated with Balikatan, the field

exercises in Luzon did not generate controversy. Ironically, what should have been non-controversial--the humanitarian activities--became a lighting rod for critics of U.S.-Philippine military cooperation, due to sensitivities where they were held and misperceptions about their intent. However, the gratitude expressed by Filipinos assisted by the various civil-military projects clearly demonstrated how these projects can have a positive impact on skeptical audiences. Candid observations made by local officials illustrated the effectiveness of humanitarian projects in reaching areas prone to terrorist recruitment and activity. One local official in central Mindanao said that some of the demonstrators protesting Balikatan activities in his area had not only cheerfully admitted they had been paid to carry anti-Balikatan posters, but that they had also received free medical care during a Balikatan activity after the demonstration. By the end of this year's exercise, positive coverage from a wide spectrum of Philippine media outlets outweighed negative reporting that attempted to mischaracterize Balikatan.

#### RETHINKING MIX OF BALIKATAN ACTIVITIES

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**¶8. (C)** At the conclusion of this year's Balikatan exercise, the Embassy team discussed several ideas to improve future Balikatan exercises. One idea is to decouple humanitarian activities in Central Mindanao from the Balikatan military exercise and, instead, spread the humanitarian assistance in the most sensitive regions across the year. Another idea is to focus humanitarian assistance under Balikatan on remote regions new to U.S. assistance, such as Balabac, and leave more traditionally sensitive areas of Central Mindanao to other times of the year. The Philippine military leadership proposed that next year's Balikatan include military personnel from Singapore, Malaysia, and the United States. All four militaries would participate in integrated field training exercises and humanitarian assistance projects conducted across the Philippines. While some options examined the possibility of downsizing the number of field training exercises and increasing the number of civil-military projects, others discussed future Balikatan exercises being more closely coordinated with community relations activities and medical assistance projects conducted by the USNS MERCY and other vessels during their visits to the Philippines. Future Balikatan and other joint

MANILA 00000893 003 OF 003

exercises will need to adapt to the changing priorities of the host nation.

#### COMMENT

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**¶9. (C)** This year's Balikatan exercise was a success, despite the efforts of a small but vocal group of critics to obstruct the exercise. Thousands of U.S. and Philippine soldiers conducted field exercises without incident, and in the largely Muslim areas of the southern Philippines, U.S. forces benefited from the force protection provided by their Philippine counterparts and, together, safely conducted humanitarian assistance activities to populations in need of assistance. Cognizant that the complaints associated with Balikatan may surface again in relation to future activities such as the USNS MERCY visit in May, the Embassy is examining ways to better involve Philippine authorities in establishing improved communications with known skeptics of U.S. assistance before future activities occur. We are carefully reviewing various options to ensure that our Philippine counterparts, while realizing the benefits of these future exercises, are willing to play a stronger role in developing the agenda and outcomes of the events. Planning for Balikatan 2009 and other U.S.-Philippine joint military activities must consider the range of strategic effects we are seeking to accomplish and the potential perceptions -- public and private -- of the various elements of the exercise

on different key audiences in the Philippines.  
KENNEY